

Portrait of a Lady

Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality

By Jonathan Aitken

(BLOOMSBURY, 764 PAGES, \$35)

REVIEWED BY JOHN R. COYNE, JR.

IN HIS SPLENDID *Nixon: A Life* (1993), the book many credit with setting in motion the serious reevaluation of Richard Nixon and his presidency, Jonathan Aitken writes in a note: "Nixon's childhood duties as a junior shopkeeper bear an intriguing similarity to the upbringing of Margaret Thatcher....who was raised in a small, family grocery store in Grantham, Lincolnshire, working hard both shop and school with after-hours attention from her highly political father, Alderman Roberts."

Aitken's *Margaret Thatcher* (nee Roberts) is a believable girl and woman, credibly drawn in this highly readable book by former Thatcher cabinet member and close family friend of 40 years—so close that for three of those years, while involved in a relationship with Margaret Thatcher's daughter Carol, Aitken seemed destined to fill the Iron Lady mother-in-law.

His intention here, he tells us, was to write "a biographical portrait rather than definitive biography. I tell her story, but with the freedom to capture its light and shade with reflective criticisms at the end of every chapter." In Aitken's portrait, discussion of politics and political actions are important, but his emphasis is on the character and personality of the woman initiating the measures, and the effects those often unpopular measures had on her.

As the hard-working daughter of a hard-working and religiously devout father, whom she admired greatly, Margaret Thatcher was in many ways a 19th-century figure born into the 20th, with touches of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and perhaps Tolstoy, a blend of ambition and a belief that she could accomplish anything she put her mind to. A person of great character and faith whose doubts were private, she was required to come to grips without

John R. Coyne, Jr. is a former White House speechwriter and coauthor, with Linda Bridges, of *Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement* (Wiley).



complaint, as strong women once did and in reality are still expected to do, with the fact that her career would to a great extent be shaped and judged within the boundaries of a man's world, and that she would be subjected to the petty and senseless

snobberies encountered in the Britain of her early years (and perhaps still today) by a shopkeeper's daughter.

As a wife, mother, and successful politician, the girl was the model for the woman. True, as Aitken points out, she could be irascible, petty, snappish, vengeful, and bitter, especially so in the later years when she was betrayed by members of her own party (Aitken calls it a coup). But she was also absolutely loyal, generous, kind, and forgiving (as Aitken can attest), a solicitous wife and mother, who worried—as all working women worry—about whether her two children were getting enough maternal attention. Throughout her career, even at the height of her stature, she cooked, cleaned, and insisted on fixing her husband's breakfast.

Aitken describes how during the last push on Port Stanley of what was to be her great victory in the Falklands, a war she had prosecuted despite heavy opposition, with the latest casualties "weighing heavily on her mind," she spent a rain-soaked morning watching a trooping of the colors, after which "she gave a lunch party for some thirty children of her personal 10 Downing Street staff." When asked who prepared the lunch, the Prime Minister replied, "Oh, I did. I stayed up late last night to put a meal together."

Much of what Aitken writes of Thatcher's public life and accomplishments has been thoroughly discussed by others, most notably by Charles Moore in his magisterial biography (see *TAS*, September 2013). But what sets Aitken's highly readable book apart is his personal relationship with the Thatcher family, and the insights into Margaret Thatcher as a woman, mother, and wife provided by that relationship. There were very real vulnerabilities, but they were human vulnerabilities, recognizable to us all, and if anything they strengthen Aitken's portrait of a woman who suffered her share of human foibles—who, that is to say, was one of us—yet who

achieved great things by force of character, willpower, and personality.

"In the summer of 1976," writes Aitken, "I began dating Carol Thatcher. Our relationship became serious, lasting for over three years." During that period, he writes, observing the interactions of Thatcher, her husband Denis, and her children, Aitken saw, occasionally, the real Margaret. "She was hospitable, feminine, confiding, dysfunctional within her family, direct with her daughter's boyfriend and much more vulnerable than I had realized."

Denis and Carol were warm and endearing characters. Neither adjective seemed appropriate for Margaret, yet she was attractive because of her looks and her energy....She was an excellent if monomaniac hostess, insisting on doing all the wine pouring, cooking, and washing up herself....She bustled around the kitchen at high speed like a television chef on fast forward. With the same acceleration, she cooked breakfast every morning for Denis, who could get pernickety if his bacon was not grilled in a certain way.

Aitken "occasionally saw unexpected sides to the outwardly tough matriarch," among them "glimpses of her frugality, vulnerability, and maternal affection." The frugality manifested itself on an evening when he'd bought four tickets for a performance of Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. Because his sister had the lead role in the play, Thatcher had assumed the tickets had been complimentary, and when she found that he'd paid for them, insisted on going halves. He refused to tell her the cost, and the next day "she sent me a blank cheque signed 'Margaret H Thatcher'. She became cross with me after discovering....that I'd never filled it in or cashed it."

"The vulnerability," he writes, "was well hidden, but it was there":

One night, after an 11.30pm vote in the House, I dropped Carol home at Flood Street. Margaret was on her own in the sitting room reading some papers. I put my head round the door to say goodnight and saw that she was red-eyed, visibly upset.

I asked what was the matter. "Nothing, really," she sniffed. "One of our colleagues was unbelievably unpleasant to me in the division lobby....said I was wrecking the party..."

This seemed such an unlikely cause of tears that I treated it rather insouciantly. "He was probably pissed," I said. "Don't let it get to you."

"I hurt too, you know," she said, getting up and leaving the room. It was the first sign to me that the Iron Lady had a soft centre.

As for maternal affection, he describes a skiing weekend with Carol in Switzerland, made possible by her mother rearranging a vote so he could get away to be with her. Afterward she grilled him on the details of the weekend, "asking me about snow conditions, ski runs, restaurants, the local fondue and whether Carol had any other friends or skiing companions. 'I get so worried about Carol being out there all on her own.'" Aitken continues: "Even more poignantly, as I was leaving her office Margaret said, 'You won't tell Carol that I was worrying about her, will you? She will think I am being overbearing.'"

It was also a matter of maternal affection that put their personal relationship on ice. "Soon after Margaret Thatcher won the general election and became Prime Minister, my romance with Carol ended. 'You have brought great personal distress to the Queen's First Minister,' said her Private Parliamentary Secretary (PPS) Ian Gow." Aitken spares us the details of the breakup, writing that "it was reasonable that I should have been sent to Siberia. What mother does not feel angry if she thinks her daughter's happiness has been destroyed by a young man?" He'd made her daughter cry, and as any parent knows, there can be no greater offense.

Nevertheless Aitken remained in Parliament and "grew into becoming a great admirer of Margaret Thatcher." And in the later years, when she'd retired and he had been named Minister of State for Defence, he went to see her for advice on armaments:

At the end of our talk, I said I would like to mention something rather personal. Taking a deep breath, I apologised to her. "I handled the break-up with Carol terribly badly," I confessed. "I know I made such a mess of things that I upset you, too, as her mother. So I just wanted you to know that I am very sorry for that."

Thatcher looked totally stunned. There was an awkward silence in which she seemed to be choking up. Knowing how difficult she found any kind of personal or family matters, I took my leave quickly, wondering whether I had made a mistake in reopening a painful memory.

However, a week or two later, Denis came over to me at a party and shook hands: "Thank you for what you said to Margaret. She appreciated it a lot and so did I."

From that moment, his "communications with Margaret Thatcher got better and better"—so much so, that she asked if he'd like to be considered as one of the candidates to be chosen as her official biographer. "So I sent her an inscribed copy of my 670-page biography of Richard Nixon, and hoped for the best." The reasons for the final choice were quirky, but Aitken concedes that "she made a wise choice in appointing the excellent Charles Moore." In the end, that was a break for the reader, too, for had Aitken been chosen, we would never have had *this* book, with its portrait of a woman in full and its emphasis on the character and personality that made possible her historic accomplishments—which are worth study of their own.

Aitken writes of an event he helped arrange in 1982, a visit by Richard Nixon to Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street. Nixon's advice to the prime minister: "The Soviets will listen to you before they will listen to us. They see you as strong, they see you as a tough right winger, which they always respect. They know you've got a lot of clout with our...inexperienced White House. With your credentials, you can bring a new realism into East-West relations, which are right now stuck in a ruck."

And that's precisely what she did.

Her detestation of Communism was anchored in religious, moral, political, and religious conviction, and early on in her career she took the Soviet Union to task for its expansionist policies, often against the wishes of the champions of detente in her own party. The Russians, she said in a speech as opposition leader, "are bent on world dominance....The men in the Soviet politburo don't worry about the ebb and flow of public opinion. They put guns before butter, while we put just about everything before guns. They know they are a superpower in only one sense—the military sense. They are a failure in human and economic terms."

This enraged the men in the Kremlin, who, never noted for the subtlety of their humor, "decided to counter-attack

"The Soviets will listen to you before they will listen to us. They see you as strong, they see you as a tough right winger, which they always respect."

as "a heroine of anti-Sovietism around the world from the dissidents of Eastern Europe to the leaders of China." It didn't play well with many of her fellow members of the shadow cabinet. But British politicians of the time weren't always noted for their hard-eyed dealing with the Soviets.

The Iron Lady epithet stuck, and she stuck to her principles, eventually winning the confidence of Mikhail Gorbachev, and taking a star turn in Moscow, where she became something of an icon for her performance in televised debate with party-approved Soviet journalists, personifying the freedoms and democratic values "crucially important in the populist struggles that were taking place inside the Soviet Union."

The relationship with Gorbachev grew into genuine friendship, and she became an effective intermediary between Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan. "Always," writes Aitken, "she was first and last America's ally, yet she combined this with being Gorbachev's only Western confidante." It was as a trusted and effective intermediary, writes Aitken, that she "played a key part in bringing the Cold War to an end. It was one of her finest foreign-policy achievements."

In his moving Thatcher obituary of Mrs. Thatcher (see *TAS* May 2013), Aitken writes that in an interview conducted for the present volume Mikhail Gorbachev "paid Margaret Thatcher the glowing tribute of saying that her personality and her achievements were greater than those of any other political leader of her time. It was a fitting tribute to a remarkable leader."

As is this honest, heart-felt, and fully drawn portrait of a great lady. ✦

with ridicule," Aitken writes. In the army newspaper, *Red Star*, they came up with "the worst insult they could think of. They dubbed her 'The Iron Lady.'"

Hah, hah, and another jug of vodka. "The epithet made headlines around the world. Margaret Thatcher revelled in it. 'They never did me a greater favour,' she commented." As a result of that speech and the Soviet response, she was hailed